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ABSTRACT

This paper examines political maneuvering within academia, the concerns of English as a Second Language (ESL) faculty, and methods that faculty can use to overcome campus politics and address their concerns. ESL faculty are often concerned about: (1) the lack of support from mainstream college faculty; (2) too many part-time positions; (3) attitudes towards ESL students; (4) the marginal status of intensive English programs (IEPs) at many institutions; (5) the use of for-profit IEPs instead of regular, institution-related IEPs; and (6) institutions that offer degrees in teaching of English as a foreign or second language, but that offer few courses. To overcome these concerns, faculty need to establish networks of people who can assist them in reaching their goal. They also need to educate people about a specific problem or concern, build up demand for a desired course or program, bring in outside experts, appeal to financial considerations, publicize concerns, know and respect other people's agendas, and seek official sanction. (MDM)

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The Politics of Academia: Points of Departure

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Most of us, when beginning academic careers, have little idea of the type and extent of political maneuvering within academia. A few lucky people have mentors who guide/protect them, but the rest struggle through a long learning/adjustment period. In an HEIS discussion session in Baltimore, we were able to put together a few areas of concern, and a few basic tactics that could be used to successfully negotiate a position.

The concerns that were mentioned included: (a) lack of support from mainstream academic faculty and advisors for students who are required to take/need ESL, but avoid it to their own detriment; (b) an unhealthily high ratio of part-time to full-time faculty, and lack of action to support a stated policy of increasing the number of full-time positions; (c) attitudes toward ESL students -- ESL staff should "fix them" -- or, I don't want "them;" (d) marginal/low status of Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in many institutions of higher education -- this includes many institutions which have no tenure-track positions for ESL faculty; (e) a concern that more and more institutions may try to replace successful in-house IEPs with for-profit centers which pay instructors less and which allow instructors no access to the university administration; (f) universities/linguistics programs which offer degrees in TEFL/TESL but appear to devalue the profession -- for example, by offering few actual courses in the area of specialization.

The beginning to any solution seemed to be a process of identification, first of your "goal," then of the barriers to that goal, and then of the forces which can work to overcome those barriers.

Various approaches which have been seen to be useful in reaching goals included:

(a) Network. Sometimes getting to know just one person with clout who is sympathetic to your cause can work miracles. In one example, a single individual with a few telephone calls was able to solve a situation that the ESL faculty had been trying to resolve (unsuccessfully) for 14 years.

(b) Educate. There are people who might be happy to help you, but they need to know there's a problem, to understand the problem, and to believe in your solutions to the problem. One participant mentioned that an influential administrator was sympathetic to ESL, but needed to believe that spending his political chips would result in a positive result; in other words, he needed to believe that there was a problem, that the solution to the problem would work, and that he had enough support in other parts of the campus to make his efforts worthwhile. Once convinced, he was able to get any number of things done.

(c) Build up a demand. If large numbers of people (students and/or faculty) express concern that something be done, administrators begin to listen more closely. For example, get the instructors who teach the linguistically underprepared students to let their administrators know that unless these students get the ESL they need, the prepared students, the underprepared students, and the instructors all suffer.

(d) Bring in outside experts. Sometimes in-house ESL faculty can be perceived as having a bias, so their opinions are discounted. If you can bring in experts, or at least cite situations at other institutions that parallel yours and support your position, this can often be enormously helpful.

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(e) Appeal to the financial side. If you can show that your solution can save or make money, you're way ahead. If your program is already benefiting the institution financially, make sure people know about it.

(f) Make it visible. For example, do your teachers lack status? In one situation, teachers volunteered to help in things like entrance composition reading with the "regular" English teachers; as a consequence, the ESL teachers were able to gain respect for themselves as competent instructors who **chose** ESL.

(g) Know and respect other people's agendas. Find out who has vested interests, and who might feel threatened. You need to make sure these people do not feel that they will lose if your proposals/actions go forward.

(h) Get official sanction. For example, look into accreditation by TESOL and NAFSA. Even if it's not as "official" as some other types of accreditation, it still adds to status and respect.

Karen Stanley teaches English as a Second Language in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Central Piedmont Community College. If you would like to contribute to a follow-up article on these or other issues, please send your contributions to her at: P.O. Box 35009, Charlotte, NC 28235-5009, USA.